You Asked

Provide evidence from both Biblical texts and other cultures that ancient civilizations covering the periods of the Old Testament up the through the first century C.E. would have understood that the "hatred" that God had for Esau in contrast to Jacob, and that Jacob had for Leah in contrast to Rachel, was merely idiomatic covenantal language showing preference and not contempt. Discuss the relationships just cited and provide extra-biblical sources as well.

Gemini 3.1 Pro Extended

To understand how the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) mind comprehended the words "love" and "hate," we have to strip away our modern, highly psychologized definitions. In modern English, these words almost exclusively describe intense emotional states—affection versus malice.

However, in ancient Semitic languages, including Biblical Hebrew (and carrying over into 1st-century Koine Greek), the concepts of "love" (*'ahav*) and "hate" (*sane'*) were frequently used as **idioms of relative preference, legal status, and covenantal choice**. "Love" meant to choose, elevate, or remain loyal to. "Hate" meant to bypass, legally demote, or prefer less.

Here is the textual and historical evidence from both the Bible and surrounding ancient cultures demonstrating this idiomatic use.

The Domestic Sphere: Jacob, Rachel, and Leah

The story of Jacob's two wives provides the clearest internal biblical evidence that "hate" means "to love less" or "to prefer another."

In Genesis 29, Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah, but he works another seven years to marry her younger sister, Rachel, whom he truly desires. The text explicitly defines its own terms:

> *"Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was **greater than** his love for Leah... When the Lord saw that Leah was **not loved [literally: hated / senu'ah]**, he enabled her to conceive..."* (Genesis 29:30-31)

The Contextual Evidence: Verse 30 states Jacob loved Leah *less* than Rachel. Verse 31 describes Leah's status as being "hated." The text equates "loved less" with "hated." Jacob did not possess an active, malicious hostility toward Leah—she was his wife, and they had several children together. Rather, "hate" here describes Leah's secondary status and Jacob's relative lack of preference for her compared to his chosen primary wife.

Extra-Biblical Evidence (Ancient Marriage Contracts): This usage is strongly supported by ANE legal documents. In ancient marriage contracts found at **Elephantine** (a Jewish colony in Egypt dating to the 5th century B.C.E.) and among the earlier **Nuzi tablets** (15th century B.C.E.), the term "hate" is used as a strictly legal, technical term.

- If a husband or wife wanted to initiate a divorce or alter the legal standing of the marriage, the official legal formula recorded in the documents was, *"I hate my husband,"* or *"I hate my wife."*
- It did not require proof of emotional malice or abuse; it simply meant, "I am legally separating from/rejecting this union."

The Covenantal Sphere: God, Jacob, and Esau

The phrase *"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated"* originates in **Malachi 1:2-3** (written in the 5th century B.C.E.) and is later quoted by the Apostle Paul in **Romans 9:13** (1st century C.E.).

In this context, the language is not about the individual men, but about the nations they represent (Israel and Edom) and God's covenantal election. God "loved" (chose) Jacob to inherit the Abrahamic covenant. He "hated" (bypassed/did not choose) Esau for that specific covenantal role.

The Contextual Evidence: If God emotionally despised Esau with malice, we would expect Him to curse Esau's descendants. Yet, the biblical text shows the opposite. In **Deuteronomy 2:4-5**, God commands the Israelites, who are marching toward the Promised Land, not to attack Esau's descendants (the Edomites):

> *"Do not provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land, not even enough to put your foot on. I have given Esau the hill country of Seir as his own."*

God protected Esau’s inheritance and blessed him with land. The "hatred" of Esau was strictly covenantal non-election—he was simply not the chosen vessel for the messianic lineage.

Extra-Biblical Evidence (Suzerain-Vassal Treaties): In ANE political treaties, "love" and "hate" were standard diplomatic terms for loyalty and rebellion.

- **The Amarna Letters (14th century B.C.E.):** In these diplomatic correspondences between the Egyptian Pharaoh and his Canaanite vassals, the vassals constantly write about "loving" the Pharaoh. For example, Rib-Hadda of Byblos writes, *"My lord, just as I love the king my lord, so does the king of Beirut..."* This did not mean romantic or emotional affection; it meant political loyalty. Conversely, to "hate" the king meant to break a treaty or choose an alliance with a rival king.
- **The Sefire Inscriptions (8th century B.C.E.):** These Aramaic treaties between ancient kings explicitly use the language of love and hate to describe diplomatic fidelity. If a vassal "hates" his lord, he is breaking the covenant.

When God says He "hated" Esau, an ancient audience understood this as Suzerain-Vassal language. God was stating, "I did not establish my primary treaty/covenant with Edom."

1st-Century Continuity: Jesus' Use of the Idiom

The understanding of "hate" as an idiom of preference survived perfectly intact into the 1st century C.E. We can see this clearly by comparing how two Gospel writers recorded the exact same teaching of Jesus:

- **Luke 14:26:** *"If anyone comes to me and does not **hate** father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple."*
- **Matthew 10:37:** *"Anyone who **loves their father or mother more than me** is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*

Luke records the raw Semitic idiom ("hate"). Matthew, knowing that Gentile audiences might misunderstand the idiom as emotional malice, translates the *meaning* of the idiom into Greek conceptual terms: "loves more than."

By placing these texts side-by-side, we see definitive 1st-century proof that the ancient Jewish mind understood "hate" in these contexts not as emotional contempt, but as an idiom requiring one to place a lower priority on one relationship in deference to a higher, chosen covenant.